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ABSTRACT

Indians should be the ones to determine Indian education policy. Local control and freedom from outside interference would be the best thing for Indian education all around. Policymakers must first realize that education, if it is to be relevant to American Indians, must return in both content and substance to Indian traditions. Rather than continuing present paths, raticnality and a concern for both children and communities dictates that the Indian education problem be reduced to its basic components. Indian education must be taken away from outside experts and returned to the smallest communal unit existent. (SAS)

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The 80s - Return to Traditions

Indian education has traditionally been a pawn of outside influences. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, policy-makers, determined to bring recently subdued tribes into the main stream of American life, advocated various educational theories almost all of which originated in the philosophical worldview of British empirical and political philosophy. Theories of learning were yet to be developed and cultural values of the larger society were conceived to be ingrained in the natural order and largely responsible for the material success of American society. Allotment of tribal lands, an experiment with private property as a learning device, was the chief educational tool for Indian adults, the off reservation boarding school where children were rudely isolated from their communities and traditional culture were thought to be the answer to educational problems of younger Indians.

By the turn of the century former Indian Commissioner, Francis Leupp, wrote in his book, The Indian and His Problem, that the solution to Indian problems was merely a matter of proper and sustained administration. By the time of the New Deal this belief had been rudely shaken and New Deal educational policies reverted to community participation and decision-making in an effort to restore to Indian communities a measure of responsibility for educational experiences. Day schools on the major reservations and a realistic integration of smaller reservation school districts with state and local systems brought a sense of reality to Indian education. The effort of the federal government to escape from its educational

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responsibilities by subsidizing state educational organizations, as seen in the Johnson- O'Malley Act in 1934, blunted a progressive element within the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the experiment with local control withered and faded as the Second World War came.

The post-war years had two basic characteristics which had a complementary role with respect to each other and acted in a joint function to move Indian education backwards to the ideologies of the last century. Increasing government educational activities as exemplified in P.L. 815 and P.L. 874 made Indians a pawn in the larger game of empire-building within state and local educational systems. Indians were important to local education if only because their presence guaranteed a certain amount of federal funds for a school district and virtually no monitoring, eliminating political problems for local school administrators. Within the private educational arena, school consolidation became the overwhelming passion and the ratio of teachers to administrators in almost every school district in the nation moved rapidly into a condition in which it became more important to keep records and construct facilities than to teach children.

The efforts of the federal government in the 1960s and 1970s were a badly conceived effort to return to ancient theories of education complicated by the developments of the 1940s and 1950s in school consolidation and the victory of administration over education. The vaunted "War on Poverty" featured many educational programs because policy-makers rejected out of hand the ideas of guaranteed wage work for unemployed members of minority groups. In place of public employment such programs as "Head Start", "Follow

Through," "Neighborhood Youth Corps," "A Better Chance" and the Vista Volunteers had the cumulative effect of creating a compensatory educational system operating side by side with the regular school system, run for the most part by concerned citizens who were badly trained and continually harrassed by requirements for fiscal and program orthodoxy.

Following the Kennedy Report on Indian education, in which emotions overcame sensible planning and the committee expressed a surprising sense of outrage and naivete with respect to conditions then existing on Indian reservations, the contemporary movement to restore Indian education to local communities gained strength. Recent educational laws have emphasized local control while maintaining a preference for educational theories based upon the movement of education from teaching to administration. The vast majority of funds now available for Indian education go to upgrading administrative procedures and ensuring efficiency of school systems thus returning the subject of Indian education to the days of ex-Commissioner Francis Leupp. Indian education today might be said to be more behavior modification and less substance of teaching and content education than at any time in Indian-white contact.

Looking ahead at the next decade, it is imperative that the Congressional policy-makers take cognizance of the periodic cycles of ideas that recur in the field of Indian education. The slogans appear in a regular cycle from local control to consolidation to innovative non-Indian cultural values to local control with a deadly mechanical beat. The cycle looks differently because the

language of technical educational theory changes in each generation. Insofar as basic ideas change, very little is accomplished in each period of Indian education. The rate of change within the cycle is the only element in Indian education that does change so that as we have moved from the 1950s to the 1970s the period of experimentation and sloganeering is increasingly reduced. The present confusion in Indian education and the absolute bewilderment of local educational committees, regardless of what legislation these groups are organized under, now occurs because we have reached a point of simultaneity in the cycle and all ideas and concepts appear at once.

Recent efforts to survey parents, evaluate school programs, and increase the efficiency of educational delivery systems have produced very little in the way of concrete suggestions. We have now reached the condition of having no answers because we have no development time between elements of the educational cycle. When this confused intellectual condition is intensified by the annual requirements that educational programs be refunded on a yearly basis and the increasingly complex questions of eligibility of different programs and educational institutions, we reach the present state of impasse where local, state, regional, and national educational meetings produce a group of stunned educators asking about minor adjustments in the "regs" without any further thought about the education they are supposed to provide. The medium of funding has become the message of Indian education. Too many people today simply go through the motions of education hoping that

their behavior will conform to federal administrators expectations.

Given this state of affairs, policy-makers in approaching the subject may well want to move backwards to the beginning of the cycle and contemplate again the substance of Indian education. In doing so they must first realize that education, if it is to be relevant to American Indians, must return in both content and substance to Indian traditions. That is to say, not only must the local educational institution be controlled and directed by the local community, the content of what is taught must be determined by the local community. The content of education is generally a function of the type of teaching techniques used and so when we talk of returning education to the local community we are really talking about the discarding of modern administrative procedures and teaching-learning theories in favor of more spontaneous and community-related activities.

In practical terms this type of education would reduce the administrative role to an absolute minimum in favor of a greatly expanded teaching staff dealing with an increasing smaller class of students on increasingly specific subjects of instruction. The traditional Indian teaching format approaches the tutorial in its specificity enabling both student and teacher to share a particular learning-teaching activity and dealing specifically with the knowledge and experiences of the world in which the teacher has lived and in which the student expects to live. The content of this kind of education emphasizes how to live in the world and what it means to be a human personality within a social-political context.

One of the major reasons why non-Indian educational techniques and institutions have been unsuccessful with American Indians is because the non-Indian educational theories preclude this type of relationship except at the graduate student level. American education, as it moved from predominantly private institutions to mass education of public institutions, was highly influenced by the thought of Horace Mann of Massachusetts. Visiting Prussia and seeing the instant obedience of the Royal Guards, Mann adapted his theories of education to produce the same results as the German Army. Thus we have classrooms with rows of uncomfortable chairs and desks and education as a routine memorization of facts presented as absolute truths by teacher occupying a disciplinary role in relation to the students. Traditional Indians regard this format and exercise as the greatest insanity and developments in the post-war decades in learning theories skirt the admission of this insanity while approaching in practice its procedures and format.

Reduction of the administrative function of school systems in favor of the teaching component is a relatively simple task that requires only the formalization of teacher-aides and other para-professional personnel as an integral part of the school system and a downgrading of the mania for keeping records, counseling, and administering intelligence and personality tests - all functions which are presently badly handled in Indian and non-Indian schools alike. Obviously this movement also means a phase-out of certain kinds of consolidated schools and an emphasis on increasingly smaller schools at the local level. Present gigantic buildings may continue

to perform some useful community function but they should no longer be viewed as educational centers.

A significantly paced reduction in consolidated schools in favor of much smaller local schools would almost immediately solve the problem of parent involvement. It would reduce the need for institutional disciplinary activity since parents and community would once again be able to exercise this function. Reduction would allow community-introduced variations in schools to adapt the process of education to the uniqueness of the local people. The need to produce a uniform school calendar and a uniform educational profile would disappear in favor of local schools meeting the specific needs of the community. Today the decline of test scores and the rise in drop out rates is directly related to the onset of adolescence and the awareness of the complexity of personality. Most of the tribes recognized this particular life crisis and provided for it through ceremonials. These ceremonials should be made a regular part of the educational experience even if it means that children of this age will not formally attend school for a year while they are instructed in traditional customs and beliefs and made an adult part of the community. But the life crisis will be resolved in an Indian manner that will assist in resolving many of the pressing problems suffered today by reservation communities.

Educational experts may well decry these recommendations. It must be remembered as they voice their concern, that they are the group who primarily benefits from making education and increasingly administrative function. Another set of problems is currently con-

fronting us which makes these recommendations appear sensible and rational by comparison. Fuel costs are escalating and it will soon be financially impossible to continue to support large consolidated schools in rural areas, whether they are on Indian reservations in the south and west among non-Indians, or even in the mid-continent regions of relative affluence. Heating costs and bus route expenses will force a movement back towards smaller schools which are located in the local community and subject to the control of that group.

Reduction of large consolidated schools will reveal the large waste in present administrative practices which few contemporary educators are willing to admit. The various administrative levels which today characterize educational institutions will not be needed in smaller schools because decision-making will be placed closer to the classroom, again revealing that much of the money now invested in school systems is wasted in record keeping and reports. Once the need for large-scale planning, complicated budget requests, district-wide projects and unnecessary compensatory programs that are designed to motivate students through sleight-of-hand learning techniques are eliminated, the actual content of education will show a dramatic improvement because the relationship between the student and teacher will no long be cluttered with bureaucratic distractions and requirements.

Given the present rate of inflation, all other costs of education will continue to rise at alarming rates making the larger institutions obsolete. We already see profound breakdown in some areas of American life and the future seems to hold no significant options

which would enable us to continue to give financial support for the kind of institutions we have today on any scale or in any area of life. To continue to examine the subject of Indian education apart from the contemporary political and economic milieu would only perpetuate the compounded mistakes of the past. Any break with the past of significance involves more than the traditional answer provided by Congress: more money and greater efficiency in delivery. These options no longer exist so the great experiment with cultural transformation of the American Indian which has dominated Indian education for over a century must also come to an end. Rather than stubbornly continue present paths, rationality and a concern for both children and communities dictates that we reduce the problem to its basic components: Indian education must be taken away from outside experts and returned to the smallest communal unit existent which is basically the point of departure from which this mess was created over a century ago.